Health fair for heteros only?

By Craig Washington

Guest Commentary

Days after Atlanta's 1993 weekend blizzard, I started my job at AID Atlanta as the new African American Outreach Coordinator, charged with providing HIV prevention skills to local black communities. As an HIV+ openly gay man, I was both excited and a little anxious. I wondered if heterosexual audiences would refute the message because the messenger was after all one of those people who are supposed to get it. I convinced myself that despite the persistence of daunting stigmas, things were getting better. It had been 10 years since Eddie Murphy had released a comedy album that included jokes about catching AIDS indirectly from his girlfriend kissing her gay friends. Magic Johnson's classy and courageous disclosure laid out our "dirty laundry" and called out the proverbial Emperor as "butt naked." Black people could no longer pretend to not see the raging mammoth in our living rooms.

I was much too hopeful to believe that eleven years, twelve AIDS walks, and thousands of deaths later, a major HIV health fair in Atlanta featuring the magnanimous Magic himself would have excluded an organization because that organization was gay. But it happened **last month** at the most well known church on historic Auburn Avenue. YouthPride, a support and advocacy agency for gay youth received an invitation to participate in the highly publicized fair hosted by Ebenezer Baptist Church. When church officials found out that the group was gay, the invitation was rescinded. Reading from a statement prepared by Senior Pastor Rev. Joseph L. Roberts, an assistant pastor said the retraction was "not a rejection they were unwelcome, just a statement that it was not a political forum" (Southern Voice, April 9 2004).

Rev. Roberts might as well have posted a sign at the church door that read "for heterosexual organizations only". But that's not the way we exclude folks in the new South. His attempt to justify his action (however implausible) speaks to his desire to save face and his awareness that blatant discrimination even against gays is unacceptable to many Atlantans. A few years ago, such intolerance might have seemed out of place in the city that Ralph McGill, Maynard Jackson, Ivan Allen and Martin Luther King called home. A city whose top two government positions are occupied by two women, one black, the other lesbian. Like the rest of the nation, Atlanta is now weathering a turbulent clash of consciousness. Several of Atlanta's most prominent blacks including State Senator Fort, Cynthia Tucker and Coretta Scott King regularly challenge black folks about their negative treatment of gays. However the gay marriage debacle has drawn public outpourings of anti-gay sentiment channeled by religious and civic black leaders.

Yet, when I read the news, I wondered how can Ebenezer Baptist Church, a symbol of social transformation, host an HIV health fair and exclude those who represent the most affected population group in the country. I want to believe that Roberts did not intend to stymie the efforts of AIDS service providers by closing the gates on a gay organization that provides HIV testing for gay youth in a safe setting. I want to assume that his love and concern is not conditioned upon one's sexual orientation. But those of us who are black and gay have suffered a great deal at the hands of unintentional negligence, and the good intentions of those who claim to love us but hate the sin. My early optimism has been tempered by a decade of baby steps toward progress backpedaled by clubfooted bigotry.

As she introduced the guest speaker at the community forum that followed the health fair, Ms. King ironically underscored the hypocrisy of homophobia. Her all too timely remarks drew the connections between such intolerance and the persistent HIV infection rates that plague blacks and gays more than any other group in this country. Unlike many of her contemporaries, this indefatigable activist refuses to hoard the universal struggle for human rights in the U.S. as if it were for black people only. But what will it take for us to realize that we don't need to emulate those who denied us power by disempowering others in order to feel powerful? It is my hope that we will heed the late Black lesbian feminist writer Audre Lorde who proclaimed **"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."**

Health fair for heteros only?

By Craig Washington

Guest Commentary

Days after Atlanta's 1993 weekend blizzard, I started my job at AID Atlanta as the new African American Outreach Coordinator, charged with providing HIV prevention skills to local black communities. As an HIV+ openly gay man, I was both excited and a little anxious. I wondered if heterosexual audiences would refute the message because the messenger was after all one of those people who are supposed to get it. I convinced myself that despite the persistence of daunting stigmas, things were getting better. It had been 10 years since Eddie Murphy had released a comedy album that included jokes about catching AIDS indirectly from his girlfriend kissing her gay friends. Magic Johnson's classy and courageous disclosure laid out our "dirty laundry" and called out the proverbial Emperor as "butt naked." Black people could no longer pretend to not see the raging mammoth in our living rooms.

I was much too hopeful to believe that eleven years, twelve AIDS walks, and thousands of deaths later, a major HIV health fair in Atlanta featuring the magnanimous Magic himself would have excluded an organization because that organization was gay. But it happened **last month** at the most well known church on historic Auburn Avenue. YouthPride, a support and advocacy agency for gay youth received an invitation to participate in the highly publicized fair hosted by Ebenezer Baptist Church. When church officials found out that the group was gay, the invitation was rescinded. Reading from a statement prepared by Senior Pastor Rev. Joseph L. Roberts, an assistant pastor said the retraction was "not a rejection they were unwelcome, just a statement that it was not a political forum" (Southern Voice, April 9 2004).

Rev. Roberts might as well have posted a sign at the church door that read "for heterosexual organizations only". But that's not the way we exclude folks in the new South. His attempt to justify his action (however implausible) speaks to his desire to save face and his awareness that blatant discrimination even against gays is unacceptable to many Atlantans. A few years ago, such intolerance might have seemed out of place in the city that Ralph McGill, Maynard Jackson, Ivan Allen and Martin Luther King called home. A city whose top two government positions are occupied by two women, one black, the other lesbian. Like the rest of the nation, Atlanta is now weathering a turbulent clash of consciousness. Several of Atlanta's most prominent blacks including State Senator Fort, Cynthia Tucker and Coretta Scott King regularly challenge black folks about their negative treatment of gays. However the gay marriage debacle has drawn public outpourings of anti-gay sentiment channeled by religious and civic black leaders.

Yet, when I read the news, I wondered how can Ebenezer Baptist Church, a symbol of social transformation, host an HIV health fair and exclude those who represent the most affected population group in the country. I want to believe that Roberts did not intend to stymie the efforts of AIDS service providers by closing the gates on a gay organization that provides HIV testing for gay youth in a safe setting. I want to assume that his love and concern is not conditioned upon one's sexual orientation. But those of us who are black and gay have suffered a great deal at the hands of unintentional negligence, and the good intentions of those who claim to love us but hate the sin. My early optimism has been tempered by a decade of baby steps toward progress backpedaled by clubfooted bigotry.

As she introduced the guest speaker at the community forum that followed the health fair, Ms. King ironically underscored the hypocrisy of homophobia. Her all too timely remarks drew the connections between such intolerance and the persistent HIV infection rates that plague blacks and gays more than any other group in this country. Unlike many of her contemporaries, this indefatigable activist refuses to hoard the universal struggle for human rights in the U.S. as if it were for black people only. But what will it take for us to realize that we don't need to emulate those who denied us power by disempowering others in order to feel powerful? It is my hope that we will heed the late Black lesbian feminist writer Audre Lorde who proclaimed **"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."**